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The Singing Wire

Jerry found the toy in the old bureau just as the phone rang in the frozen attic, a Boy Bombardier Set with cross-haired scope, and wooden bomb the size of a penlight battery.

"How nice to hear from you!" he told Ben. I hope you and Renata are cozy on this ferociously white evening. I'm up in the attic and it looks like a Christmas card down there on the street. Am I breaking up by the way?--little portable phone." The Boy Bombardier toy in one hand, he held the phone in the other, its vibrating antenna forming and reforming a ghostly fan among the large wet flakes pasted on the window.

"I can hear you fine," Ben answered, "It's a shame you can hear me." Instead of following up his puzzling remark, Ben shouted "Alone with all the memories in the attic, huh? I don't know if that's good or bad! Sorting out things, what to throw

away what to...?"

"You got it! I only started moving in my stuff a few hours ago but already I find I can't live with the clutter Mom did. But, you were about to say something else...?" Silence from the other end as snow hissed through a cracked pane, topping a little pyramid on the sill.

Jerry wondered about the phone, shook it. "Ben?" he questioned. Red air darkened in the attic.

"Whoa! Don't shout. I'm here! Just had to find a way... tell you Jerry...uh, sit down on a stair or something and, yes, let's do cease the small talk."

Jerry put the phone and the toy on a dusty cardboard box and then dropped a hand down a few inches behind him, bent at the knees to lower himself into a sitting position on the threadbare oriental. He took his time: what could it be that he had not already heard in a lifetime of work?

Ben waited for the exertion to stop, and then said "Sorry to be bearer of these tidings, especially since your mother has so recently... Anyway, Jerry, the short and dirty of it is you're out. It's just a question of when. Hirwatari Industries has taken over." Jerry's racing heart made the reddish snowlight bloom colder.

"Hirwa...never heard of..." he managed to whisper, his white shirt ballooning in a draft, floating in the inclined mirror atop the knobby-legged Victorian dresser--the drawer still thrusting out which had held the toy.

"Yeah, Charlie Garrity sits on both boards, in Boston and in Kyoto--a real frequent flier. He tipped me. They're mostly in Brazil and Argentina is why you never heard of them, and of course Japan. Chief lawyer, believe it or not, was one Hector Gozales from Rio. Anyway, Charlie said you should start bargaining now for pension. They promised to give you golden handshake but the amount of gold depends on you." Outside, more snow wheeled from out of a purpling sky, almost obscuring the streetlight. Sleet ticked against the old house. "Expect it to take a good long time the way the Japs bargain." Ben's voice, quieter, seemed itself to tick. "They know we're mostly in a hurry and they exploit that."

Jerry stared at his hand, scored from the rug. He managed to gather himself. "Well I, I don't have to squeeze the last cent. My Jookie is well launched into his own career now and my ex is remarried. So I'm the old bachelor...middle-class-rich--almost."

"I should be so fortunate," laughed Ben, "still a few

mouths to feed, and two in college you don't hear from except for money! Hey I've been trying to extract from my own company for good and proper reasons. Golden handshake? I'll take a brass one, anything! But, never mind me! Hey, you'll do all right, but it's still awful. Hell you only gave that company a life! That's all. Is Jookie still the baseball player?"

"I don't think so. Can't do that forever."

"Too bad. But anyway, Jerry..." Ben was trailing off at the other end until a stronger tone suddenly asserted "Hell in my company we're only a quarter or so Japanese owned! And don't believe these stories about these extraordinary Japanese managers. The firm runs on in the same incompetent way. The only difference is that we were actively incompetent under Harley Olchuff and now under the simplistic Ryo, so lately rammed into place, we are passively so." Jerry was half-listening, trying to clamp the pain. A door banged somewhere in the drafty interior of the house. "Listen to this, Jerry! I tried to sell Pecky Warren of Rich industries in Buffalo, and he told me to come back in three months 'cause they were way over inventory? Well let me tell you about the soft way my Japanese supervisor treats what he regards as failure by repeating it: *Way over inventory, ah yes. Way over inventory, ah yes.* Then the last time he says it, for that particular day I mean, he

laughs like it's the greatest joke ever, you know?"

Jerry hadn't heard it all but offered "Inscrutable"-- his voice resonating with the raking sleet.

"Inscrutable my ass! Just another way of grinding your balls. I'll take old spastic Harley's hopping and yelling and screaming anytime. Besides, everything is business is scrutable really. Too much so."

And later that odd form, *scrutable*, rasps Jerry's mind amid the shuddering waves of sleet and hail and snow. The little toy with its tiny wooden bomb still rests on the cardboard box, and Jerry can't reconstruct, eyes jammed shut, whether the Japanese ships were depicted flatly on a sheet of cardboard or had been small wooden models. But when he opens his eyes, a tiny ship flickers, made three-dimensional by the threads of the old rug. It vanishes but has delighted him in his sadness, his childhood imagination returning somehow. He clicks on the brute of a floorlamp, and the sudden yellow light makes the attic look more ancient and mellow, more deep along its shadows, and smell more sharply cold.

When he looks through the bombsight at the lamp, the lenses are gummy, the crosshairs inside fuzzy. He breathes on the lenses and pulls out his shirttail to wipe them. Snow

splotching blue-black against the window, his shadow becomes an agitated monster when the tiny bomb suddenly falls to the floor. Jerry looks up to see the figure of a boy crossing the drifted street. He can hear faint crying, and holds his breath to listen, willing his huge shadow to stop vibrating.

The snow under the streetlamp swings to become a vector connecting their pain, traveling each to each as if along a singing wire.

Jerry turns the scope around, trying to see the diminutive figure against the snowrush. What looks back, haloed by fuzz, dotted by frozen tears, is his own young, gold face. He fumbles and drops the scope, and the boy is gone. Jerry's heart seizes and then fairly bursts. Soon he's punching numbers on the phone, his fingers speckled by sweat. Outside the plow rumbles by.

"Be home!" Jerry shouts. No rings are audible at the other end.

But Jookie has heard his voice. "Dad? I...I thought you were really tied up by Grandmom's estate."

"Jookie!" he cries in that old masters' glow of the attic, the bureaus and tables and boxes suffused by dusty lamplight and appearing to swim inside their shadows, the sound of the snowplow receding to a whisper. "I don't know how even to ask:

but what can I do for you? Is there anything, Son? Is there anything?"